

CALLING THE PRESIDENT A LIAR:  
WOMEN, REAGAN, AND THE BOMB IN *THE DAY AFTER*

A Project Submitted to the College of  
Graduate and Postdoctoral Studies  
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements  
For the Degree of Master of Arts  
In the Department of English  
University of Saskatchewan  
Saskatoon

By

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## ABSTRACT

In my project, I analyze the political implications of the 1983 made for television film, *The Day After*. For those who have seen the film, it is likely that the most memorable scenes are the ones in which the people of Lawrence, Kansas experience the devastating effects of nuclear bombs. However, I argue that the quieter scenes demand examination. Through observing the moments in which average Midwestern families interact, it becomes clear that director Nicholas Meyer and writer Edward Hume sought to push back against archaic beliefs held by President Ronald Reagan's conservative administration and his followers. The film asks viewers to examine the relationship between investing in both nuclear technology and the "traditional" family structure, thus highlighting the multi-layered hypocrisy that is a result of this "partnership." That is, Reagan, his administration, and his constituents worked to dismantle families of *any* definition. Considering the presence of nuclear weaponry—and the United States' unstable relationship with the Soviet Union—Reagan risked eliminating all families. Furthermore, because Reagan insisted on the importance of traditional family values, his claim that he hoped to protect the American people was disingenuous. With or without the help of nuclear weaponry, he worked to eliminate American women, by insisting that "traditional" and "hetero-patriarchal" are synonymous.

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

No one could have guessed that my MA research would depend on time spent analyzing a made for television film from 1983 and scouring scholarly writings about Ronald Reagan. I thank my exceptional supervisor, Dr. Lindsey Banco, for introducing me to such an intriguing and bizarre television event. Dr. Banco responded to each of my writing drafts and questions with care and precision, for his help and the investment of his time in this project, I am incredibly grateful.

I extend my gratitude to a wonderful mentor, Dr. David Parkinson, whose patience and grace are unmatched. Many thanks to Professor Matthew Cashion, Dr. Mark Chavalas, and Dr. Haixia Lan, of the University of Wisconsin-La Crosse, who inspired and supported my decision to attend graduate school.

Thank you to my partner, Jon Charpentier, for laughing and learning with me. To all of the brilliant women in my life, I cherish you: Anna Schneider, whose perseverance I admire; Rose Davey, a kindred spirit; Carly Petrusky, my dearest friend, a woman with brains and buttons, who supports me even when I try to deadlift sixty gallon buckets of honey; and to my favorite colleagues, Kayla McCutcheon and Rhonda West. I tossed the rocks.

Finally, I thank my parents, Lori Gorichanaz and Michael Miller, without whom I would not have gotten this far. I'll do a dance and sing a song, in your honor, the next time we are together.

## **DEDICATION**

For my parents.

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## Calling the President a Liar: Women, Reagan, and the Bomb in *The Day After*

In Nicholas Meyer's 1983 made-for-television film *The Day After*, America's Heartland comes under nuclear attack. It is not certain whether other cities suffer the same fate, as Meyer's focus is on the devastation of average, Midwestern families in Lawrence, Kansas. Although it is suggested that the Soviet Union is responsible for the attack, the film does not explicitly state who dropped the bomb first, nor does the film delve into the reasons why the city of Lawrence is decimated. What is certain is that disaster relief seems entirely absent. The camera pans over the dead and dying who lie on the rubble of the ruined hospital. Detached from the horror his people have endured, the fictitious president attempts to provide verbal support through a radio broadcast. The president expresses his condolences. His words ring hollow, though, as he claims:

America has survived this terrible tribulation. There has been no surrender, no retreat from the principles of liberty and democracy for which the free world looks to us for leadership. We remain undaunted before all but Almighty God...the government functioning under certain extraordinary emergency options. We are prepared to make every effort to coordinate relief and recovery programs at the state and local level.

While these are the words of a fictitious president, the feigned empathy of an American president detached from reality is conceivable to an American people looking to Reagan's leadership in 1983. In the film, the president insists that the American people remain a strong unit, as he attempts to imbue them with a sense of power. Words in the speech connote war. For this president, to admit defeat and powerlessness is unacceptable; the American people will fight. By his inappropriate assessment, the citizens have "survived." More obvious, though, is that his people struggle to stay alive.

The audio goes to static for a split-second, as the president assures the American people that God is with them. Between "Almighty God" and "the government," the words are indistinguishable. The static, then, creates a bridge, subtly connecting the two powers. And the inaudibility of the words between "Almighty God" and "the government" suggests that the power of the government is contingent on the faith of the American people. The people need their Christian God, the people need their government, and the president is the all-knowing, almighty, patriarchal Paraclete. There is a close relationship between these two powers, and yet an honest observation of the scene reveals that the American people are stripped of their power and left alone. Neither God nor Government has saved them.



The president in the film is faceless and nameless, but Reagan is clearly the inspiration for the leader of this fictitious world. He is included in the film to emphasize the disingenuousness of a president who claims to want to protect the “traditional” family unit, while maintaining a problematic pro-deterrence stance. Then, taking into consideration the political climate of the 1980s, it is possible to use the film to question Reagan’s agenda even further. An analysis of the quieter scenes—the familial, or melodramatic moments that occur before and after the nuclear attack—highlights Reagan’s hypocrisy. Taken with an examination of Reagan’s connection to the Christian Right as well as nuclear weaponry, it is clear that *The Day After* acts as a critique of the Reagan administration. An analysis of these scenes—in which familial moments are bookended by nuclear catastrophe—uncovers Reagan’s potential complicity in the elimination of the American people. Furthermore, because the film is a critique of the conservative agenda, *The Day After* acts as a public service announcement that highlights the relationship between gender inequality during the Reagan era and the nuclear arms race. That is, *The Day After* asks viewers to recognize that the consequences of maintaining a “traditional” family are that women are the ones who primarily suffer from antiquated familial structures, while men maintain their patriarchal power.

### **This Public Service Announcement will be Televised**

Advertised as an “event,” the 1983 made-for-television film, *The Day After*, promised to be an unforgettable experience. As expected, the combination of melodrama, special effects, and stock-footage from the testing of bombs lured in 100 million viewers.<sup>1</sup> A testament to its complexity, there are various interpretations possible of this film. Perhaps for some viewers, as one critic wrote, “It’s hard to know what ABC hopes to accomplish with all this hacking at our heartstrings” (Attanasio 14). This same critic refers to the film as a “docudrama” (13). Certainly, it is unimportant to force the film into one genre; it should not be dismissed as purely melodrama, nor should it be viewed as an action film. Rather, the aforementioned description of the film as an “event” suggests that Meyer wanted *The Day After* to exist as a separate, covert protest, free from the confines of genre rules. As Meyer states, two goals were to ““clobber sixty million people over the head”” and ““to call Reagan a liar””<sup>2</sup> (qtd. in Overpeck 273). The film

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<sup>1</sup> According to Deron Overpeck, it was “the most-watched television film in the medium’s history” (267).

<sup>2</sup> As Overpeck argues, “By presenting a devastated heartland and ruined lives, the film eviscerated the notion that shovels and doors were all that Americans would need to survive nuclear war—that is, it told a national audience that Ronald Reagan was a liar, just as Meyer had said it would” (276).

criticizes the idea that Americans could survive a nuclear attack.<sup>3</sup> Meyer and Hume surpassed these goals.

However, with a broad goal of figuring out what effects *The Day After* had on audiences—with a focus on what they call “attitudes, beliefs, and salience”(558)—in the 1980s, Stanley Feldman and Lee Sigelman conclude that it is challenging to change viewers’ deeply-rooted beliefs with a creative film. They state: “Some beliefs about the world may be quite immune to change because they are central in an individual’s belief system or are linked closely to other beliefs” (558). Furthermore, Feldman and Sigelman argue that subtlety in filmmaking is not effective when attempting to be politically radical:

[I]t is simply too much to expect a television program to transform people’s fundamental social and political values. If a prime-time program confronts a political issue only indirectly and/or if the issue is one on which most viewers already have deeply ingrained attitudes, the program has very limited potential for changing attitudes. (559)<sup>4</sup>

Of course, Feldman and Sigelman’s findings do not suggest that Meyer’s covert, indirect approach is entirely ineffective, or without importance. The scholars’ results simply suggest that the film demands closer analysis.

According to Feldman and Sigelman, the film emphasizes the devastation incurred by the bomb. They argue that *The Day After* does not address ways to prevent a nuclear holocaust: “[The film is] focused on the relatively narrow issue of the aftermath of a nuclear strike not on what led to the attack (a question the moviemakers deliberately avoided)” (558). Feldman and Sigelman are correct, in a sense. Meyer and Hume do not use the film to explicitly state which country is at fault for starting the nuclear war, and the film does not plainly state that the United States government and its supporters are culpable in the nuclear attack. However, Feldman and Sigelman are mistaken, claiming that the filmmakers “deliberately avoided” addressing the political climate that would be the cause for nuclear war. That is, it is telling that blame is not exclusively placed on the Soviet Union. The film does not allow the U.S. to play victim.

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<sup>3</sup> “One poll, conducted in late 1981, indicated that three-fourths of Americans expected nuclear war within a few years. To allay the public’s concerns, Reagan appointees began to argue that a nuclear war could be easily survivable” (Overpeck 271).

<sup>4</sup> “In a classic study, Robinson (1976) found that the impact of the CBS documentary ‘The Selling of the Pentagon’ was largely restricted to issues that comprised the specific focus of the program; Elliott and Schenck-Hamlin (1979) and Kaid et al. (1981) reached the same conclusion in analyses of the impact of ‘All the President’s Men’ and ‘Washington: Behind Closed Doors,’ respectively” (559).

As Deron Overpeck suggests, Meyer and Hume were steadfast in their decision to indict the U.S. as an active participant in the destruction of humanity. Overpeck states, “In fact, the film-makers declined any government cooperation on the production when the Department of Defense insisted that the script blame the Soviet Union for the war” (272). By refusing to gratify to the wishes of the Department of Defense and blame the Soviet Union for the attack, Meyer and Hume were, in fact, making a subtly radical statement. As Meyer claimed, he “felt a moral obligation to make [*The Day After*] as a gigantic public service announcement” (Palmer 195). If the goal of the filmmakers was simply to address the survivability of a nuclear attack—or to make a claim about the Soviet Union being at fault—certainly Meyer and Hume would have conceded to the demands of the U.S. government.<sup>5</sup>

In reaction to *The Day After*, other scholars and critics—contending with the control and influence of the American government in the late 1970s and early 1980s—agree that the film responds to a perilous time when nuclear technology was on the mind of many Americans. But for audiences in the twenty-first century—used to viewing action films with budgets in the nine digits—the relevance of a made-for-television movie may be overlooked. As I will discuss in this paper, though, these political and film scholars leave space for further critique of prevalent social issues of the Reagan era, which continue to be topical. One of Trump’s many tweets reads:

North Korean Leader Kim Jong Un just stated that the “Nuclear Button is on his desk at all times.” Will someone from his depleted and food starved regime please inform him that I too have a Nuclear Button, but it is a much bigger & more powerful one than his, and my Button works! [*sic*] (qtd. in Tharoor)

During a period when nuclear weapons are again a symbol of power and American machismo,<sup>6</sup> with an administration in office that thrives on US nationalism, 2018 definitely echoes a different time. Like Trump, Reagan looked fondly on a golden age that only existed for white men.

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<sup>5</sup> For more information about the U.S. government’s involvement in the filmmaking process, see *Operation Hollywood: How the Pentagon Shapes and Censors the Movies* by David L. Robb: “Most Americans are unaware that the U.S. military routinely reviews scripts and that the Pentagon compels changes to convey the government’s message. Although rarely publicly acknowledged, major films have been rewritten to remove negative, though historically accurate, facts to present a more positive military image” (17).

<sup>6</sup> See “To Counter Russia, U.S. Signals Nuclear Arms Are Back in a Big Way,” by David E. Sanger and William J. Broad for a breakdown of “The Nuclear Posture Review” released by the Pentagon in February of 2018: the document “explicitly rejects Mr. Obama’s commitment to make nuclear weapons a diminishing part of American defenses. The limit on warheads — 1,500 deployable weapons — that goes into effect on Monday expires in 2021, and the nuclear review shows no enthusiasm about its chances for renewal” (Sanger and Broad).

Before I unpack the relationship between the social policies of the Reagan administration and key scenes in *The Day After*, I will analyze Reagan's relationship to nuclear weaponry. It is within this first section that I highlight the President's inconsistent principles. The second section of the paper will begin to identify the reasons for Reagan's waffling ideologies, through an analysis of his strong association with the Christian Right. Following the discussion of the Moral Majority's power within the Reagan administration, I will examine the political implications of *The Day After*, underlining the social issues that affect the traditional family structure and women's rights. The sum of these sections will highlight the ways that creative minds work to address deficiencies and corruption in political systems. A closer look at the hypocrisy and agenda of a conservative political administration can inspire viewers of *The Day After* to reflect on the significance of addressing social political issues on a creative public platform, under the guise of a nuclear holocaust, action film.

### **Reagan and the Bomb**

After viewing *The Day After*, Reagan wrote of his reaction to the film in his diary: "It's very effective and left me greatly depressed" (585). His autobiography states that the happenings of the film were unsettling: "In several ways, the sequence of events described in the briefings paralleled those in the ABC movie. Yet there were still some people at the Pentagon who claimed a nuclear war was 'winnable.' I thought they were crazy" (586). However, the incongruities found throughout scholarly literature suggest that there is not a consensus among Reagan scholars regarding the president's feelings on nuclear weapons. Angela Santese acknowledges the conflicting messages sent by Reagan's weaponry policies. According to Santese, Reagan scholars use two schools of thought—"the triumphalist" and "the revisionist"—to "explain the evolution of Reagan's attitude on nuclear matters" (497). Santese states,

The triumphalist school maintains that Reagan's strategy of 'peace through strength' forced the Soviet Union to accept the U.S. negotiating conditions and scrap intermediate missiles from its arsenals. The revisionist perspective asserts that Reagan was basically a nuclear abolitionist who was concerned with the peril of nuclear annihilation and since the beginning of his first term had tried to achieve the elimination of all nuclear weapons. (497)

However, it seems that neither of these categories sufficiently define Reagan's stance and actions regarding weapons. Both "the triumphalists" and "the revisionists" ignore the fact that, even

though Reagan claimed to want to protect Americans from a nuclear attack, he was disingenuous. Citing Beth Fischer, writer of “US foreign policy under Reagan and Bush,” Santese states, “between 1981 and 1983 [...] Reagan seemed uninterested in arms control, rejecting SALT II, since in his perspective it strengthened the alleged military imbalance, and proposing instead the START approach” (500).<sup>7</sup>

But START (Strategic Arms Reduction Talks) was not created to achieve equal reduction of strategic weapons from both superpowers. When expanded, the acronym suggests that the superpowers hoped to be transparent in their discussions about nuclear weaponry. The intention of the US, though, was not to reach a fair agreement. According to Fischer, the goal of START was to place “[a] cap on land-based warheads that would have required the Soviets to destroy more than half of their arsenal, while allowing the US to increase its numbers. Given the administration’s hawkish rhetoric and military buildup, this proposal was widely viewed as insincere” (Fischer 271).

Furthermore, as Lou Cannon states in his biography of Reagan, *President Reagan: The Role of a Lifetime*, “For Reagan, strategic defense was the ultimate answer to Armageddon, not a ploy to force the Soviets to the bargaining table . . . Reagan truly wanted reductions in nuclear arms, but he did not want to give up strategic defense to get them” (Cannon 282). Cannon clearly confirms Reagan’s “quandary.” Reagan claimed to want to protect the American people, and reduce nuclear weaponry, but not if that meant giving up his defense tactics. In his autobiography, Reagan recalls a meeting he had with Gorbachev:

“We have a choice,” I told him. “We can agree to reduce arms—or we can continue the arms race, *which I think you know you can’t win*. We won’t stand by and let you maintain weapon superiority over us. But together we can try to do something about ending the arms race.” (Reagan 15)

When dissected, this statement is curious. Here, Reagan insists that a reduction in weaponry needs to occur. Yet he explicitly states that the U.S. needs to hold onto more weapons than the Soviet Union. President Reagan’s strategy was flawed. His priorities were focused on domination and maintaining superiority, his goal of a Soviet Union arms reduction ludicrous.

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<sup>7</sup> As Beth A. Fischer states in her book, *The Reagan Reversal*, “In the spring of 1982...the president announced that a new round of arms negotiations, the Strategic Arms Reduction Talks (START), would begin [in June]” (25).

Reagan closes his response to *The Day After* by stating: “My own reaction: we have to do all we can to have a deterrent and to see there is never a nuclear war” (585). For the president, this deterrent meant increasing the number of nuclear weapons, a counterproductive “preventative” solution. As Santese states, “Reagan’s nuclear build-up and his nuclear strategy . . . according to antinuclear activists was increasing the risk of a nuclear confrontation” (497).<sup>8</sup> Also, because of the “ensuing military build-up, harsh anti-Soviet rhetoric” and the aforementioned refusal to dissolve strategic defense, it is questionable whether Reagan truly expected that “tensions between the two superpowers” would lessen (Santese 496).

### **The Christian Right and Reagan**

Yet Reagan’s apparent preoccupation with the United States maintaining control and power was not confined to discussions of nuclear weaponry and often encompassed so-called culture war issues, including the rights of women. The Reagan administration—with the help of the Christian Right—exercised its iron grip on significant social issues of the 1980s. The “complex” and “symbiotic” relationship Reagan had with the Christian Right, as defined by Matthew C. Moen, does not in fact prove that Reagan acted out of moral obligation when speaking on “moral” issues (206). Rather, the emphasis placed on these moral issues was largely strategic. In an analysis of Reagan’s State of the Union addresses, Moen states that Reagan “[consistently] spoke of salient issues [such as] abortion, school prayer, pornography, gay rights, the Equal Rights Amendment, busing, school textbooks . . . tuition tax credits . . . [and] . . . an erosion of ‘traditional values’” (200). Citing William Martin from his book, *With God on Our Side: The Rise of the Religious Right in America*, Francoise Coste states, the most important issues for the Moral Majority had to do with maintaining a traditional nuclear family. These important “moral” issues “were directly related to the sexual revolution of the 1960s and the issue of women’s rights” (2). And Reagan’s dismissive attitude regarding the ERA and his discussion of maintaining the traditional, patriarchal familial structure further reinforced the idea that the rights of women were not important.

Moreover, speaking on these issues guaranteed the support of the Moral Majority. Moen states, “The Christian Right . . . craved the supportive rhetoric, access, and political credentials

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<sup>8</sup> Fischer confirms Reagan’s belief that nuclear weapons might be necessary: “In October 1981 the president suggested that the United States could participate in a limited nuclear war. Reagan told reporters that he could envision a situation in which tactical nuclear weapons could be employed ‘against troops in the field without it bringing either one of the major powers to pushing the button’” (124).

the President could provide, as well as his personal support and his institutional bases as it pressed its agenda on Capitol Hill” (206). Jeffrey L. Brudney and Gary W. Copeland elaborate on this alliance between Reagan and his followers: “Individuals associated with [the religious right] were more likely to be conservative than the rest of the electorate; they were more likely to vote . . . and they were much more likely to vote for Ronald Reagan” (1078)<sup>9</sup> because Reagan spoke on issues that were important to religious conservatives. It was a strategically sound move for the Reagan administration to cater to religious conservatives, and because of this association Reagan solidified an interdependent relationship with the Christian right.<sup>10</sup> Both Reagan and the loudest, far-right Christian supporters were empowered. Buttressed by the support of the Moral Majority, Reagan—as the President of the United States—was put in a position to explore various conservative issues, including support for nuclear weaponry.<sup>11</sup> Because of the power of nuclear arms to provide (mutually assured) destruction, Reagan had the power to dismantle the very family unit that he claimed to protect, thereby highlighting the hypocrisy of a president who preaches the importance of family while maintaining an arms race.

### **The Christian, All-American, Traditional Family**

Not only do Meyer and Hume address these social issues, but they highlight the connection between the role that religious constituents played in Reagan’s political career and Reagan’s puzzling stance on deterrence and nuclear weaponry. Only a few minutes into the film, *The Day After* introduces the importance of Reagan’s “traditional” family to the narrative. Viewers are brought into the lives of an “average” Midwestern family; a caption, overlaying a farmhouse, states that the scene is taking place at “The Dahlberg Family Farm.” As William J. Palmer argues in *The Films of the Eighties: A Social History*, “The opening . . . is consciously ironic because beneath that pastoral façade in missile silos under the fields wait the machines, the technology of destruction. The opening of the film laughs at the naïveté of superficial American

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<sup>9</sup> Brudney and Copeland state: “Among those who identify with evangelicals, both turnout and Reagan support were very high. Over 83 percent of that group reported that they had voted, and 86 percent of them claimed to have voted for Reagan” (1076).

<sup>10</sup> According to Stephen Flurry of *The Trumpet*, “U.S. President Ronald Reagan sent this note to the WCG [Worldwide Church of God] shortly after [its founder, Herbert W. Armstrong’s] death...’Mr. Armstrong contributed to sharing the word of the Lord with his community and with people throughout the nation. [You can take pride in his legacy]. Our prayers are with you. God bless you.’”

<sup>11</sup> Regardless of Reagan’s inconsistent and contradictory beliefs, his most powerful supporters were vocal about their support for nuclear weapons. In 1985, Prime Minister of New Zealand, David Lange and Rev. Jerry Falwell debated the morality of nuclear weaponry. Prime Minister Lange argued: “. . . weapons themselves are self-defeating.” Falwell argued against Lange (qtd. in Wittner 297).

life” (197). Meyer presents the quintessential American life in sharp contrast to the looming disaster. Late for their wedding rehearsal, Denise Dahlberg (Lori Lethin) and her fiancé Bruce Gallatin (Jeff East) run from the farmhouse. The dialogue is saccharine, as the two of them attempt to put on their outerwear, while running to Bruce’s motorcycle. Exasperated and giddy, Denise says, “Oh, Jee!” As they jump onto the motorcycle, Bruce replies, “Your dad is going to kick my butt if we are late!” Denise can barely contain her excitement. “Okay! Let’s go!” “Yee haw!” Bruce says. “Woo hoo!” Denise responds. The happy couple drive off, the camera pulls back, and the viewers are shown another image of the farmhouse, “[set] in a region that has traditionally been coded as the home of ‘ordinary’ or ‘real Americans’ who reflect conservative political and social values, has a political connotation” (Overpeck 275). In the exterior shot, chickens wander around, an American flag flows in the wind, as Denise and Bruce take-off down a dirt road (Fig. 1). The shot is picturesque, reminiscent of a stock photo.

In the shot that follows, Meyer offers Reagan and the Christian Right what they expect and want to see, while subtly undermining the idea of what a traditional family looks like. As the rest of the Dahlberg family wait for the soon-to-be-wed couple, the father, Jim (John Cullum), mother, Eve (Bibi Besch), daughter, Joleen (Ellen Anthony), and son, Danny (Doug Scott), stand outside the church (Fig. 2). The shot establishes the nuclear family; their positions reflect each of their roles in the familial structure. As a subtle reference to the idea that the cycle of the nuclear family is meant to continue, Jim sits on the railing of the church, with his left leg propped up. Eve faces the camera, with her head turned to her right. The children, Joleen and Danny, mimic their parents. Joleen is supposed to grow-up to be like her mother and have her own children. Danny is to do the same, as the patriarch.

However, the positioning and posture of each character suggests that Meyer and Hume envision a more evolved definition of “family.” It is curious that Eve and Joleen are front and center. The woman and girl each hold onto the railing with both hands. Standing up straight, they seem firmly planted and confident. On the right and left of the mother and daughter the man and boy sit precariously on the railing. Church attendants stand behind the family, waiting for news of the young couple. The focus, then, is on the females. And because they are in the middle of the frame, with others around them, Eve and Joleen seem to be *potential* leaders. Perhaps the blocking of the actors was Meyers’ way of implying that the definition of “traditional” can



change and will change, eventually. Women have the ability to redefine what it means to be a family.

### **A Woman's Role**

Yet as the film progresses, Meyer challenges the idea of this traditional family, acknowledging the role of women's rights and reflecting on politics of the 1980s and the pushback against female subservience. Because, as Jerome F. Shapiro states in *Atomic Bomb Cinema*, "During the 1980s women moved increasingly closer to the axis of economic, political, and sociocultural power, and . . . closer to the axis of the nuclear dilemma" (211). But the Reagan administration "promoted a conservative sexual agenda" which targeted female American citizens (Schaller 54). In a biography entitled *Ronald Reagan*, Michael Schaller states that the conservative right-wing administration "reduced funding to international population control agencies that promoted birth control or even mentioned abortion, endorsed a constitutional ban on abortion, and sponsored 'chastity clinics' for teens" (54). Birth control was not an appropriate topic for discussion: "They stressed abstinence from sex as the only safe and permissible form of birth control" (54). Certainly, the Reagan administration was obsessed with maintaining traditional families—hetero-patriarchal families—and maintaining control over women.

In 1984 Reagan gave a speech reflecting his attitudes towards sexuality. Speaking to Evangelical Christians, Reagan states "that in the 1970s, America lost its 'religious and moral bearings' at the same time that its economic and other policies were in 'disarray.' The result . . . was a nation weakened spiritually as well as politically" (qtd. in Jaroslovsky in *The Wall Street Journal*). Later in the speech, he states, "'social mores of our country were being undermined. Liberal attitudes viewed promiscuity as acceptable, even stylish. Indeed, the word itself was replaced by the term, [sexually active]'" (Jaroslovsky). Here, Reagan suggests that he finds pre-marital sex abhorrent. Curiously, "promiscuity" and "sexually active" are synonymous according to Reagan.

During scenes in *The Day After* which involve interactions between family members, Meyer acknowledges this control and power of the patriarchy and draws attention to Reagan's aforementioned agenda. For example, Meyer begins to address Reagan's social policies when the film's other main protagonists, Dr. Gordon Oakes (Jason Robards) and his daughter, Marilyn (Kyle Aletter) visit an art museum. Marilyn tells her father that she will be moving away to live

with her boyfriend. As an unmarried woman, though, Marilyn should not venture off to live with a man. Yet irony peeks in when the two are positioned in front of the painting, *Le Discret*.<sup>12</sup> The subject of the painting is situated between the two of them (Fig. 3). The image is comical, of course. But the ridiculousness of the imagery should not overshadow the power of the painting. The man in the painting seems to be someone of status, asking the viewers for discretion. The painting—creating space between father and daughter—foreshadows the role that the government plays in the destruction of this familial unit.

Ultimately, though, Marilyn's "promiscuity"—as Reagan would have described it—is not the true reason for the destruction of the family; after the nuclear warfare begins, the blast incinerates Marilyn. While the family may not abide by the rule of the Christian Right, the Oakes' are still very much intact as a familial unit at this point in the film. That is, regardless of the fact that Marilyn is set to live with her boyfriend, there is no evidence that the family will be forever broken. In a later scene, when Dr. Oakes and his wife Helen discuss Marilyn's move to Boston, Dr. Oakes expresses happiness for Marilyn. Helen seems disappointed but does not suggest that Marilyn's move will disrupt the inherent structure of the family. Of course, in an alternate, fictitious world where Lawrence is not hit with a nuclear bomb, Marilyn would move in with her boyfriend. They, assumedly, would continue to engage in a premarital sexual relationship. But, again, even if the familial roles change because of the move, the inherent structure of the family remains.

Interestingly, the parents' conversation regarding their child's decision to move—one important to both of them—is interrupted by a *Special Report*. It is this broadcast that interferes with this healthy and normal family discussion. And, it is not until the government becomes involved—through nuclear warfare—that the family is literally destroyed. Thus, this scene can be understood as a criticism of Reagan's hypocrisy. If the Reagan administration's ultimate goal was to protect the American people, one would think that the priority would be to eliminate the likelihood of the literal destruction of families. Because, as the former New Zealand Prime Minister David Lange stated in a debate with Rev. Jerry Falwell about the morality of nuclear weaponry, "We all know that it is wholly without logic or reason to possess the power to destroy

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<sup>12</sup> As Carrie A. Butt states, painter Joseph Ducreux created work during a time when "New revolutionary ideas like the separation of church and state, the practice of reason over faith, and the application of natural law began affecting all facets of life."

ourselves many times over; and yet in spite of that knowledge the nuclear powers continue to refine their capacity to inflict destruction on each other and all the rest of us” (qtd. in Wittener 297). Reagan and his constituents feigned concern for the American people—among other antithetical policy choices<sup>13</sup>—and the decisions of the Reagan administration regarding nuclear weaponry did not reflect true compassion for the American people.

Furthermore, while Reagan was in office, the Equal Rights Amendment—“equality of rights shall not be denied or abridged by the United States or by any state on account of sex”—was a topic for debate (as qtd. in Somerville 111). As Anne Costain states, “By 1980, Ronald Reagan had defeated Carter and moved the Republican Party away from its long-held commitment to equality of the sexes. This helped establish an antiwoman image of the Republican Party” (121). In an effort to continue his pattern of feigning care for the nuclear family, Costain states, “[Reagan] repeatedly declared himself in favor of the ‘E and R without the A,’ seeking to portray himself as in favor of equality for women, but without a constitutional amendment” (122). According to Matthew C. Moen, “[In speeches] Reagan delivered 181 words from 1982-1984 on that issue, implying that the ERA was unnecessary to eradicate discrimination” (203). Again, it seems that Reagan’s need to uphold traditional family values stemmed from his close ties to the Christian Right. As represented by the Dahlberg family, concern for the family is not equally directed to each family member. There is a patriarchal hierarchy; the Dahlberg women play their parts, as supporting characters.

Reagan’s agenda was not concerned with the equal protection of all American citizens; rather, his administration was built around patriarchal control and appealing to the wishes of those who believed that “traditional” and “hetero-patriarchal” are synonymous. Through an exploration of Bruce and Denise’s relationship, *The Day After*, again, addresses the Reagan administration’s disingenuousness. In a scene purporting to establish this hetero-patriarchal traditionalism, Bruce and Denise are affectionate in a barn, as they lean against what appears to be a stagecoach. Bruce prods Denise to get her birth-control, so that they can have sex. Denise eventually decides to run back to the farmhouse to retrieve the diaphragm. The camera follows her, as she sneaks behind her father, who is watching baseball. Jim Dahlberg—the patriarch—

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<sup>13</sup> According to Marisa Chappell, in her book *The War on Welfare: Family, Poverty, and Politics in Modern America*, “Reagan provided a handful of tax breaks to help middle-class mothers, whether they worked for wages or cared for children full-time, but restricted access to public assistance for poor mothers, leaving them at the mercy of a sex-segregated and increasingly precarious low-wage labor market” (200).

cannot know what Denise is up to. Once Denise is upstairs she cannot find her birth control. Little sister, Joleen, has stolen it, as little sisters will do. Denise begins to chase Joleen around the second-level of the home, further emphasizing the deviant behavior of young men and women who compete with the law of the familial structure, and inviting the possibility that the patriarch will interrupt the fight. If Jim knows that Denise wants her birth control. Jim can put a halt to Denise's sinful, premarital affair.

Jim's role in this scene as the patriarch and leader parallels the agenda of the Christian Right—and subsequently Reagan—concerning men in leadership positions who are in control of family planning and contraceptives. “Backed by the New Christian Right and other advocates of a so-called pro-family program,” write Joan Aldous and Wilfried Dumon, “[Reagan's] view of how government could encourage family well-being was different from that of his predecessors” (1137). Most importantly, federal monetary support was cut for contraception and other reproductive health programs, in the 1980s. Citing a report released by Surgeon General C. Everett Coop, Aldous and Dumon state that “Monies for research on development of contraceptives and educational programs on their correct usage . . . dropped by about half in the 1980s” (1140). In opposition to a woman's right to choose abortion—and in support of conservative Christian beliefs—contraceptives, sexual health, and sexual health education were not seen as appropriate and necessary research opportunities. Men in power—with the support of the Christian Right—had control over women's bodies. Appropriately, Mrs. Dahlberg warns the girls, “I expect the two of you to settle it amongst yourselves. Otherwise I'll see that your father settles it for you.”

Superficially, the scene in which Denise and Joleen squabble is a bit clichéd and ridiculous. For some viewers, the scene may seem unnecessary or odd. However, it is a moment for Meyer to further explore the relationship between hetero-patriarchal control over women and traditional values, significant to Reagan's supporters. As Jerry Pankhurst and Sharon Houseknecht discuss, the Christian Right opposes sex outside of marriage, stating that those who are sexually active may negatively affect the family structure, because “Youths engaging in premarital sexual relationships do not affirm the patriarchal authority that was built upon the ideal (if not the practice) of chastity and monogamy” (27). When Denise sneaks upstairs, Jim Dahlberg is watching sports. But once the commotion begins, and the sisters chase each other, a *Special Report* news bulletin interrupts Jim's game. The scene cuts back and forth between the

sisters' argument and the father who seems increasingly disturbed by the alarming news. From the television, a news reporter states, "The President declared all military personnel on worldwide stage two alert." As Jim Dahlberg walks out of the house, he seems perturbed and contemplative. Music that sounds like a lone trumpet matches the dread that Mr. Dahlberg feels. The camera cuts to Denise running across the lawn to Bruce's motorcycle, and the music change is abrupt. The interjection of flutes creates a light and pleasurable tone. Jim Dahlberg watches with a furrowed brow as she "sneaks" off to be with Bruce. Mr. Dahlberg snaps out of his sorrow, in order to react to his daughter's sneaking around. The family unit is not yet destroyed by the government, although it will be. He holds—tightly—his role as the protector.

The juxtaposition of the aforementioned images and events works to highlight each moment. Similar to the scene with Dr. Oakes and Marilyn, the filmmakers place these seemingly wholesome nuclear families in positions which threaten "traditional values," while simultaneously reminding the audience that nuclear annihilation is fast-approaching. As George A. Waller states, "These families cannot . . . survive the ultimate problem, over which they have absolutely no control" (7). Pankhurst and Houseknecht highlight the presence of the patriarchal hierarchy in "traditional" families, which must be abided by. If the patriarchal structure is threatened then so, too, is the nuclear family. However, perhaps the inclusion of these scenes—which seem rather dull without deeper analysis—is Meyer's way of asking the audience to contemplate the futility and impossibility of maintaining the perfect nuclear family, especially when nuclear war is impending.

Throughout *The Day After*, numerous moments revolve around the woman's role as a housewife, which on the surface may seem trivial. The casual viewer may find these scenes laughable or frustrating. It was the woman's role to "[maintain] the integrity and well-being of the family unit." She was to shirk her "selfish individualistic [values]" (Costain 125). But Meyer is deliberate in his incorporation of female characters as a reminder that even though these women are adhering to their roles as women, their families are going to be eliminated. Ultimately, though, the women are not to blame. The government will be the cause of their demise. One scene opens with longshots of the thriving Hendry farmland, non-diegetic, optimistic music suggesting that this is an idyllic moment. A mother walks out to the clothesline to hang laundry. Her children—a boy and a girl—follow a few steps behind, carrying the other laundry basket. The family dog rests in the lawn (Fig. 4). Yet this peaceful image is interrupted.

The shot that follows snaps the viewer out of this idealized depiction of the nuclear, traditional family. Meyer fills the frame with a close-up shot of an alarming warning sign, reminding the viewers, and the mother, that danger is in her backyard (Fig. 5). The sign warns that “USE OF DEADLY FORCE AUTHORIZED” against anyone who enters the fenced area in which there are missile silos. The sign protects the nuclear technology from the people the nuclear technology is supposed to protect. The missiles hold more value, here, than Mrs. Hendry and her children. Airman Bill McCoy (William Allen Young) waves to the woman from behind a fence that encloses the missile silos. He smiles. She smiles and waves, but her smile quickly disappears. Overcome with worry, she knows that what could—and eventually does—destroy her family is just over the fence. Her nuclear family is threatened. Through the juxtaposition of these images, Meyer suggests that even though the woman is abiding by the rules of the traditional family the family is in danger.

Again, when Meyer brings the viewer into the home, the housewife is shown fulfilling her role. The young mother is in the midst of completing her domestic duties by ironing clothes. Here, the *mise-en-scène* is particularly significant. The position of the television to the ironing board is thoughtful. Typically, when a character is supposed to watch television, the actor sits in front, or close to the front, of the set. Yet, Meyer positions the woman off to the side, with the television turned away at an acute angle. Symbolic representations of the family surround the set; the news—or impending nuclear war—situates itself within the world of the Hendry’s. Mrs. Hendry then, watches the news from a peculiar vantage point (Fig. 6). What is happening on the television screen is the focus of the scene—important news is delivered. Certainly, the blocking in this scene is purposeful. Meyer did not want the woman to directly face the news, because—from her view—these news issues are not “front and center” just yet. Like Mrs. Hendry, viewers of *The Day After* learn of what could happen, even if they are not quite ready to face the possibility of nuclear war.

Later, when the mother is setting the table for a meal, her children represent the deterioration of the nuclear family. Again, Mrs. Hendry completes her duties in order to maintain this traditional, nuclear family. However, through her son’s reaction to the news report, it is clear that the family has started to fall apart. While the mother sets the table, the children watch cartoons (Fig. 7). A *Special Report* on the impending disaster interrupts the children’s program.

The parents sneak upstairs, leaving the children alone. Then, the scene begins to cut back and forth between the quieter moment of the children, and the chaos of the people reacting to the attack. First, a shot of many airmen rushing to the planes interrupts the image of the boy watching the news. This rapid change draws attention to the delivery of contradictory statements by the news reporter. In the first frame, the reporter insists that “Both sides are working together to bring about the earliest possible ceasefire” (Fig. 8). This suggests that, in the end, people on both sides will emerge from the situation unscathed. However, the scene cuts to the chaos of the airmen again. When the scene cuts back to the boy, a different reporter delivers the devastating news. The reporter states: “A nuclear bomb of undetermined strength has exploded at NATO regional headquarters.” At this point, the boy’s body language changes. Visibly upset, the boy hunches over. The breakdown begins in this nuclear family (Fig. 9). Mrs. Hendry’s son—the one who should become the patriarch of his own family—is left alone to confront the beginning of the catastrophe.

As previously stated, some of Reagan’s loudest supporters were Evangelical Christians who argued that “Families were governed by a patriarchal father (in God’s image) whose role as breadwinner and disciplinarian was balanced by the nurturing and spiritual figure of the mother. Gender roles were ordained and fixed and not subject to human reimagining” (Self 348). Historian, Robert Self cites an excerpt from an article written in *The Plain Truth*, “an evangelical magazine founded by the Radio Church of God head, Herbert W. Armstrong” (Self 348), to characterize these conservative values. Contributor Paul W. Kroll writes: “A married woman’s responsibility—especially one who has little children—is first and foremost to be a homemaker, NOT to be a breadwinner” (qtd. in Self 348). The young mother in *The Day After* does everything she should to fulfill her role as the housewife. Still, her family is threatened.

The role of Eve Dahlberg also reflects traditional feminine ideals held by the Christian Right. When the families are made aware that there is a national emergency, Jim Dahlberg and other men prepare their homes and families for disaster. Yet, Eve Dahlberg continues to prep for her daughter’s wedding. When Jim suggests that there are more pressing issues at hand, she insists that she needs to prepare the wedding food. “Don’t you know? There’s pretty much a national emergency going on!” Jim says. “Well,” Eve replies, “it’s just going to have to go on without me, because your daughter is getting married tomorrow, and I’ve got sixty-seven mouths to feed.” Of course, the idea that a person would continue to prep for a wedding when a nuclear

attack is fast-approaching, is laughable and clichéd. But this moment is not included for comedic relief. Again, the juxtaposition of these moments—the woman doing housework while a nuclear bomb is on the way—highlights the fact that even if a family abides by certain traditional ways of living, if a bomb is dropped then people will die.

Later, Eve Dahlberg continues to do menial housework. As she pulls the fitted sheet over the bed, making sure that it is in order, she attempts to complete her duties as a housewife. She distracts herself from the thinking about the horror of a nuclear holocaust. Jim pulls her away (Fig. 10). Obviously, at this point, she is emotional because she fears what is to come. Also, being removed from her duties as a housewife causes turmoil. The integrity of the traditional, nuclear family is compromised. Although, like the younger mother who does her best to abide by the traditional family values, Eve is not at fault for the destruction of her nuclear family. The bomb and the government are at fault.

After the bomb hits Lawrence, Kansas, the film draws attention to the woman's role in reproduction, abortion, and the continuation of the nuclear family. As the Dahlbergs sit in what is left of a church, Meyer includes a close-up shot reminding the viewer of Denise's ability—or inability—to reproduce. It appears as though she is bleeding from her vagina. The bright blood stain against Denise's white dress is a startling image which suggests that, due to the various harmful effects of the bomb—even if she was not dying—her ability to reproduce will likely be compromised (Fig. 11). The striking contrast of Denise's blood against her white dress—as it consumes the frame—speaks to antiabortion rhetoric of the 1980s. Robert O. Self states: “Antiabortion may have been more than a single-issue movement, but large numbers of American voters in and after the 1970s began to see abortion as a litmus test of political principles” (Self 370). Republican candidates could not afford to be pro-choice; “moral” and political issues were deeply interconnected. Self continues: “For right-to-life activists, abortion under any circumstances was murder and an affront to their vision of motherhood and ordered family life” (Self 370-371). As the executive director of the National Pro-Life Political Action Committee (NPLPAC) at the time, Peter Gemma, states, abortion “denigrated motherhood” (qtd. in Self 374).

For Reagan, who claimed to be pro-life, it was better for a woman to have the child than to have an abortion. However, Reagan's vacillating position on the issue suggests that he was not vehemently opposed to abortion and could be swayed to react according to needs of his



constituents in order to retain power. His decision to assign blame to female American citizens, however, is telling. As Michael Schaller states,

when legislature passed a law [in 1967] that lifted most restrictions on abortion, Reagan signed it. [...] Several years later when opposition to abortion became a litmus test among conservatives, Reagan claimed disingenuously that he had never read the law's provisions. He also blamed women and their doctors for using loopholes to carry out more procedures than he or the law anticipated. (21-22)

Again, when he depended on the votes of people with far-right leanings, Reagan willfully played the role of a president who placed tremendous value on the protection of Americans and the integrity of the traditional family structure, as defined by the Moral Majority.

However, Meyer is overt in suggesting that the bomb puts the possibility of motherhood at risk. Denise can no longer bear children; the bomb strips her of her “natural” duty to become a mother. And had she been pregnant, the bomb would have killed her baby. For Denise—and for the other women living in the world of *The Day After*—this “vision of motherhood” held by antiabortion activists is erased by the political leaders of the same moralistic belief. If the goal—as purported by the Reagan administration—was to keep the traditional family unit intact, certainly nuclear warfare would be the fastest way to destroy that structure. Meyer highlights the irony of a system which claims to protect the people but acts in ways which have the potential to negate the “protection.”

When a birth does occur in the film, the complex symbolism draws parallels to the discussion of family planning, and the hypocrisy surrounding the supposed “protection” that far-right Christians claim to impose on the unborn. The pregnant woman, Alison Ransom (Amy Madigan), expresses her worries about giving birth when she asks Dr. Oakes: “If you were in utero and you had any choice in the matter, would you be dying to enter a world like this?” She wants to know why she should have hope, but she does not claim to want an abortion. However, the scene in which Alison gives birth does call attention to the fact that a baby is to be born during a time when nothing is stable. Certainly, this is the wrong time to bring a new life into the world. Perhaps Alison is meant to represent all women who have babies when they lack the funds or do not have the necessary emotional support. At the beginning of this scene, while the camera shows that there are men in the room where the birth is taking place, the only close-up, tight shots are of women. The father of Alison's baby never appears on screen. Covered in blood

and dirt, with wounds wrapped in gauze, the women in the dilapidated hospital room are weary. Most are crying (Fig. 12). One woman stares wide-eyed—in a catatonic-like state—at the screaming pregnant woman (Fig. 13). They are, of course, distraught because they have experienced a nuclear disaster. The images of the crying women, though, also suggest that they feel empathy for Alison. Her pain and suffering will be that much harder, because she has to take care of a baby. Now that it is born, the support of the Christian Right is gone.

Furthermore, the shot right after Alison gives birth supports the idea that the traditional, nuclear family is no longer (Fig. 14). The first few cries from the baby are heard. Alison turns her head to the window. She does not look at her new baby. Instead, she looks at the disaster outside, and the scene cuts to Dr. Oakes walking through rubble. No matter one's interpretation of the birth's purpose within the film, it is obvious that the baby is not being born into a traditional, nuclear family. The bomb has destroyed that fantasy. This is the “New nuclear family.” Alison, if she survives, will be a single mother. Her child will have to live in a world of ruin, because of choices made by the American people and their Government.

### **Conclusion: Reagan and the Futility of His “Traditional Family Values”**

Toward the end of the film Meyer incorporates a peculiar overhead shot of a horse-drawn stagecoach moving past a pick-up truck (Fig. 15). On the bed of the pick-up truck lie the bodies of nuclear holocaust victims. As a representation of a more modern or technologically advanced way of life, the derelict pick-up truck suggests that failure to accept societal or social advancements results in the stagnation of humanity. Halted by the bomb—a result of an American government that insists that nuclear deterrence is necessary in order to maintain superiority over other countries and protect traditional family values—the people of Lawrence, Kansas, no longer have the opportunity to move forward. On the buggy—a representation of antiquated values—is a group of young people who are on their way to seek treatment. Superficially, the assignment of old-school values to the vehicle that is still able to operate might suggest that traditional values will save America. The young—those who are meant to create nuclear families of their own—will be saved. Of course, the buggy provides a false-sense of security. These young people are near death. Denise, Danny, and Stephen are not much better off than the deceased on the truck. Perhaps they are worse off, because they suffer. As one of the last moments in which these three characters are together, this image stimulates additional discussion of Reagan's professed desire for “traditional” or old-fashioned values. On both vehicles are

bodies of the deceased or people who are near-death. The shot, then, suggests that regardless of whether Americans hold onto traditional values—or deviate from these values—the end result is the same if a nuclear war occurs. Everyone suffers, and many will perish.

An analysis of the made-for-television film *The Day After* helps illuminate the relationship between Ronald Reagan and the Christian Right, by exploring the relationship between God and social politics in the political climate of the 1980s. Of course, Meyers' and Humes' horrific scenes of death and destruction are unforgettable, but their artistic and political voice is most powerful within the understated, familial scenes. While emotional—perhaps even melodramatic—the moments in the daily life of the God-fearing, average, middle-class characters inspire discourse regarding the political and moral ideologies of Reagan. Meyer and Hume did not want to simply incite fear, and they did not want to participate in the reiteration of anti-Soviet rhetoric. Instead, through addressing the issues that were seemingly important to the Reagan administration and to Reagan's loudest supporters, the filmmakers position themselves as activists. Meyer and Hume ask their audience to recognize the different ways that Reagan risked eliminating the American people. Through an examination of the close connection between the male-dominated hierarchal structure of "traditional" families and the detrimental effects of nuclear war, each with the power to eliminate American people, Meyer and Hume underline the hypocrisy of a president who insisted on retaining traditional family values, while maintaining a pro-deterrence stance.



*Figure 1: The Dahlberg family farm. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 2: The Dahlbergs at church. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 3: Dr Oakes, Le Discret, and Marilyn ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 4: Mother and children. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 5: The sign. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 6: Mrs. Hendry watches the news. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle*





*Figure 7: The children watch television. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 8: The son watches the news. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 9: The son is affected. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 10: Eve Dahlberg is upset. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*





*Figure 11: Denise. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 12: Crying women. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 13: Catatonic. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 14: Alison. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*



*Figure 15: Transporting the dead. ©1983 American Broadcast Corporation Circle Films*

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